

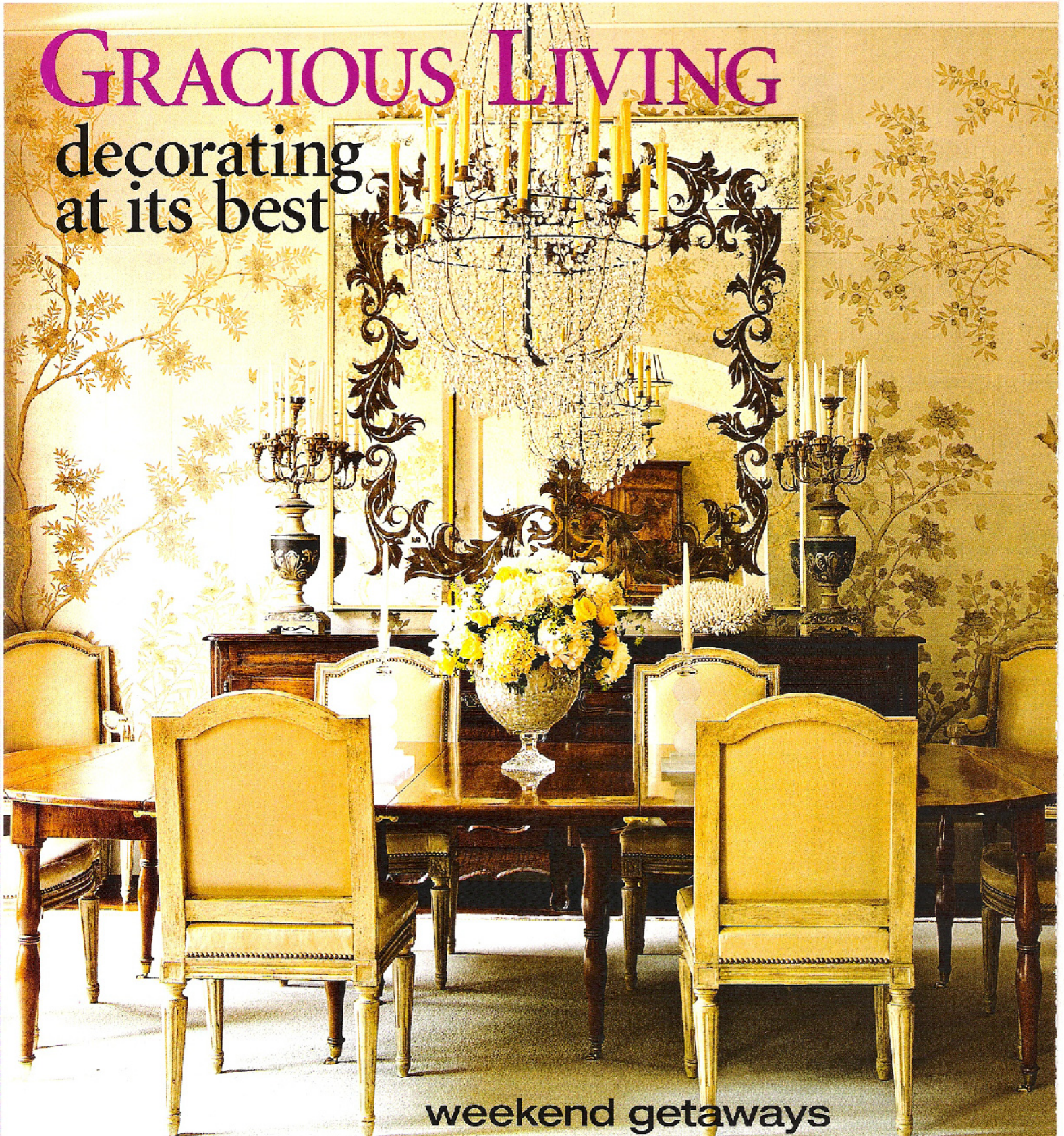
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Improving Your Overhead

Wood beams add dimension, texture, and architectural character to a surprisingly wide variety of rooms

THE CEILING IS AN OFTEN OVERLOOKED element of design, but with high-ceilinged and vaulted rooms in vogue, wood beams have become an appealing and sophisticated way to add character and patina to a room. "Beams tend to bring a high-ceilinged room down in scale, breaking up both the length and the height of the space," notes architect Hank Long. "Even on a low ceiling, wood beams can be inviting, making a room feel cozy."

Of course, exposed wood beams were once simply the structure of a room made visible, and in more refined or wealthy homes, people were eager to cover them. "Before the advent of electricity, people wanted white plaster ceilings and

walls to make rooms as light as possible," says architect Yong Pak. "It wasn't until the turn of the 20th century, when Americans were touring Europe and the plaster had begun to fall off the ceilings of old buildings, exposing the framing, that it became an aesthetic."

Dark stained wood beams became part of the vernacular in many European inspired homes, such as English Tudor and Spanish Mediterranean-style houses. Today, hand-hewn timbers and reclaimed antique beams can be found in houses modeled on

For a new Virginia home designed by architect Russell Versaci and designer Barry Dixon, the timber-frame ceiling, fashioned out of beams salvaged from old barns, creates the feel of a centuries-old English country house. The beams and rafters give the soaring space a human scale.

BY JILL KIRCHNER SIMPSON

RIGHT: In this Birmingham kitchen designed by architect Hank Long, sleek new European cabinetry is contrasted with a board-and-beam ceiling crafted from old chestnut lumber. "You often see these kinds of juxtapositions in European houses that are 300 years old. The rustic floor and ceiling help keep the kitchen from feeling too modern," says Long.

BELOW: Bracketed dark cypress beams are original to designer Jenny Peters' 1920s Mediterranean Revival villa in Miami. They offer rhythmic punctuation to a second-floor hallway and a dramatic contrast to white plaster walls.



everything from French country estates and Tuscan farmhouses to early American keeping rooms and rustic log cabins. They can be stained to contrast with the ceiling, white-washed so they become less pronounced, or left natural to proudly show their age.

To integrate wood beams successfully, consider these factors:

The style and formality of the house. "You wouldn't typically see exposed wood beams in a Georgian, American Federal, or fine French house," says architect Bill Litchfield. "In formal rooms, you are more likely to see elaborate plaster ceilings than wood beams." In a high-style house, however, you might have a kitchen or family room that is more rustic or informal with exposed

beams, or they may be used in an outdoor room, such as a porch.

The appropriate wood for the style of the house. "Early American or rural Southern homes might have heart-pine beams. English homes could have oak or walnut, while French are more likely to have oak. Mediterranean-style homes are likely to use cypress," explains Litchfield. Cedar, fir, and pine are other common choices. The way the wood is cut and finished can also affect its suitability; rough-sawn beams are more refined than hand-hewn ones, for example, and smooth carved beams or box beams with molding are also more elegant.

Ceiling height. "If you have high ceilings, such as 12 or 14 feet, you can use much deeper beams, 10 or 12



Designer Carolyn Malone whitewashed the beams in the home office of a new Palm Beach house designed by architects Norman Askins and Bill Litchfield. In combination with the all-white furnishings, it blends Swedish and Moroccan influences to create a light and airy retreat, grounded in the texture of the washed wood beams.

inches deep," says Litchfield. "On lower 8- or 9-foot ceilings, beams typically hug the ceiling, so there's more headroom." Designer Jenny Peters recommends whitewashing them in low-ceilinged rooms: "Dark beams visually lower the ceiling too much, while white can add warmth and charm." She recommends using smooth-grained wood for beams that will be painted.

Another option in low-ceilinged rooms is to install board ceilings with shallow beams, which creates textural interest without great depth or strong contrast. "There's nothing

worse than a low, long ceiling in a ranch house, so we might add detail through boards and beams," says Pak.

The type of wood you prefer—authentically old, reclaimed timbers or new wood that has been stained, painted, or faux-aged. Many architects and designers like to use reclaimed wood from old buildings for an authentic patina and texture. Antique beams are often more expensive than new, though, and may not be sized perfectly for the space. Also, old wood may have sizable imperfections, such as holes where mortise-and-tenon joints or notches

were, which will need to be plugged.

Some architects prefer to have new wood either faux-finished to look aged or treated with chemicals and left outdoors to speed the aging process. "Faux-finishers can distress wood so it looks several hundred years old," says Litchfield. "They might beat it with chains or a hammer, and then add layers of finish."

In addition to working with reclaimed wood, says Pak, "we often use new hand-hewn lumber, which still shows the mark of the hand and looks like it was meant to be used in that room versus something that was retrofitted."

Peters notes that "when you age the wood, it never comes out looking genuinely old." She prefers to stain or finish the wood and often uses a dark walnut stain for Mediterranean-style homes and a low-luster white for lighter rooms. If beams are whitewashed, Long says, "the ceiling reads more as a pattern or texture, and you don't notice the individual beams as much." He recommends that new beams, if left unstained or unpainted, be treated with wax, tung oil, or a clear matte sealer: "Waxing or sealing wood helps enhance the color and depth of the grain."

Beams can also be detailed with brackets or trusses. Carved beam moldings are often too expensive to produce today, but the same effect can be achieved by applying and building up moldings and then faux-finishing the whole. Beams can also extend into exposed columns, which can create an even more rustic effect.

Whatever style or type of beam you opt for, says Pak, "in today's world, so many things are manufactured and homogeneous, it can be very satisfying to see the touch of the hand or the evidence of the past." ♦
For sources and a guide to types of beams, see Sourcebook, page 226.